

Joint effort to fight underage drinking

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CRANSTON — For years, Rhode Island's 35 task forces have tried to curb teen drinking through local programs.

But at a meeting today, task force directors will consider a more global approach.

Facing budget cuts and a worsening economy, they may pool some of their money and resources to launch a statewide media campaign to stop underage drinking.

"There's a real commitment among the task forces across the state to work together," says Nancy Devaney, coordinator of the Narragansett Prevention Partnership and a grant manager for the West Warwick Substance Abuse Prevention Task Force. "We want to change the environment and make it harder for kids to get alcohol."

The idea isn't new. After a rash of alcohol-related arrests in Barrington last year, task force leaders and law enforcement officials in December reminded Rhode Islanders that teen drinking isn't a Barrington problem but a statewide one.

Also last year, the state Department of Mental Health, Retardation and Hospitals, or MHRH, considered squeezing the 35 task forces into 4 regional groups. That plan was nixed.

The state did, however, cut its contribution to the task forces by 23 percent.

In Providence, the Mayor's Substance Abuse Prevention Council took a nearly \$25,000 hit, "the most sizeable cut we've ever experienced," says director Caitlin Thomas-Henkel.

In Narragansett, the cut left the local task force with only \$24,000. After you hire a coordinator and print some fliers, "there isn't much left," says Devaney.

"The funding is really going to kill us over the next few years," says Devaney. Additional budget cuts couldn't come at a worse time. When the economy worsens, more people turn to drugs and alcohol, she says.

The statistics are sobering. Massachusetts and Rhode Island are among the states with the highest drunken-driving rates in the country, according to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health.

A statewide program doesn't mean individual task forces will abandon local efforts. In North Kingstown, Working Together for Wellness is using a federal grant to reach local high school students and parents. Another 13 communities received similar grants.

Still, working together makes sense, Devaney says. The different task forces have all been asked to define their goals. "We can leverage our funding and efforts to get a single message out to reduce underage drinking."